

3-6-2017

# Balm of Gilead

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**DOI:** 10.25148/etd.FIDC001810

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

BALM OF GILEAD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Michael A. Martin

2017

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Michael A. Martin and entitled Balm of Gilead, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Nathaniel Cadle

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Campbell McGrath

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Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 6, 2017

The thesis of Michael A. Martin is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

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Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2017

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## DEDICATION

For my mother, Carolina.

*Fidelium animae, per misericordiam Dei, requiescant in pace. Amen.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee: Nathaniel Cadle, for his intellectual guidance and friendship; Campbell McGrath, who taught me that poetry is a moral good in the universe; and Denise Duhamel, whose generosity binds these pages.

I would like to thank Marina, Marta, and Therese for unsung support.

I would like to thank my family, who truly live up to that name.

I would like to thank Annik Adey-Babinski, my wife and my light.

I would like to thank the editors of the following journals who published versions of the following poems:

“Succulent”—Jai-Alai

“Graceline”—Green Mountains Review

“The Past is a Trashed Motel Room”—The Mondegreen

“Ode to the Neighborhood Bird”—The Offbeat

“Abba Agatho,” “Communion,” “The Chaplain,” “A Lifeline,” and “Nautical Confessional” —Dappled Things

“Joseph of Arimathea”—Anglican Theological Review

“The Ladder of Divine Ascent.JPG”—Saint Katherine Review

“Charism”—South Florida Poetry Journal

“Magnificat”—PILGRIM: A Journal of Catholic Experience

“Elk in Church, Source Unknown”—PRESENCE: A Journal of Catholic Poetry

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

BALM OF GILEAD

by

Michael A. Martin

Florida International University, 2017

Miami, Florida

Professor Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

BALM OF GILEAD is a collection of poetry that explores the speaker's rediscovery of love and spiritual meaning in the years after his recovery from addiction and the loss of a parent. BALM OF GILEAD fits within the English poetic tradition of fastening ineffable sacred experience into more personal lyric modes, an inheritance dating not only to the works of John Donne, George Herbert, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, but to the Psalms of David. The often-confessional poems in BALM OF GILEAD borrow from the free verse and emotional urgency of Denis Johnson; the broken sonnets of Molly Peacock; and the devotional rhetorical posture of Maurice Manning. Moreover, BALM OF GILEAD orders poems through imagistic and thematic associations to document the complex means through which the speaker experiences his conversion away from the certainty of addiction and grief and into the unsure but redemptive footing of love and faith.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. Poems	
COMMUNION.....	1
ELK IN CHURCH, SOURCE UNKNOWN.....	2
BIRDWATCHING.....	4
CHOLINA.....	5
BEWARE BLOOD.....	8
GRACELINE.....	9
PSALM 23 (I).....	11
PLSAM 23 (II).....	12
THE PIER.....	13
THE PAST IS A TRASHED MOTEL ROOM.....	15
IN THE MORNING WE COMPOSE OURSELVES.....	17
IDENTITY.....	19
THERE IS A HOLE IN YOUR INFANT'S HEART.....	21
THIRTY.....	22
THE ORANGUTAN.....	23
I DECIDED TO SPEAK TO YOU DIRECTLY.....	24
PONCE DE LEON BLVD, MIAM.....	25
FOR JOSEPH OF ARIMATHAEA.....	27
I CAN EXPLAIN.....	28
BOYHOOD.....	29



AN ABECEDARIAN IN FOUR PARTS.....	32
HOMESICK AT EVENSONG.....	34
THE DAY THE DICTATOR DIED.....	37
GATINEAU PARK.....	41
THE CHAPLAIN.....	42
MY STEP-FATHER’S HOUSE.....	45
CHARISM.....	46
ODE TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD BIRD.....	47
NESTING SEASON.....	48
NAUTICAL CONFFESSIONAL.....	49
ODE TO PETTY CRIMES.....	51
THE_LADDER_OF_DIVINE_ASCENT.JPG.....	53
FELINE SELF-HARM.....	55
MY FIRST BOOK.....	56
A LIFELINE.....	58
PIGEONS.....	59
CHURCHMANSHIP.....	60
SUCCULENT.....	62
CONSIDER THE LILLIES.....	64
DEPARTURE.....	65
ABBA AGATHO.....	67
THE BLESSING OF THE ANIMALS .....	68
THE ROOMS.....	70

PRAYER INTERRUPTED, TRINITY CATHEDRAL MIAMI.....	71
MAGNIFICAT.....	72
2011.....	74

## COMMUNION

I can take your body in my mouth  
but I will have to pass on the cup.  
No matter how *transubstantiated*,  
the ethanol that runs in your blood  
is just enough to wake the dormant bug  
a synaptic and limbic blunder had wrung  
at my conception (or before, or after,  
it doesn't matter much). Laughable.  
That I could relapse off half a Eucharist,  
make of me the kind of company  
you'd bemuse with a parable or two.  
Lord, thank you for the invitation,  
which in all my thirsty carnality is  
itself *an outward sign of an inward grace*.  
I break my consecrated share of you,  
swallow at an exsanguinating pace.

ELK IN CHURCH, SOURCE UNKNOWN

First her head, window-lit,  
twitches in fight, or flight,  
antlers altar-wide from the camera's  
perspective up the nave behind.

After a minute, she backs  
away from the sanctuary rail,  
and her echoing hooves muffle  
the camera's microphone.

How she wandered in there,  
bowling over floral shrines  
like some enraged reformer  
I just read about in a beaten  
papists' commonplace book  
digitized from decay in another tab,  
is not for me to know; or perhaps  
is the wrong question to ask  
of a clip, re-posted without

context from one blog to another,

to find its way to me, a doubter.

I watch it over and over.

## BIRDWATCHING

I expect you to break through,  
Across these shoddy lenses soon,  
To burst into view, knowing full well  
I will lose you. Why's it all waiting  
And watching with you? Once,  
In a cardinal's dress, you hopped  
From mind's bough to heart's branch  
In one second, slipped on the dark  
Vestments of ravens in the next.  
I sense your nearness; and it sears.  
And though my eyes will slack  
From the long fear of blinking  
And missing you, I'll stay poised,  
Steadfast, the watch-club's last.

CHOLINA

When my mother dies  
I learn I never knew her.  
But she told me two stories,  
two girlhood miracles.

At ten she saves her family  
from a crocodile stalking  
in a river outside Managua  
where they bathe.

She is on the banks,  
no desire to wash that day.  
I like to imagine she is dancing  
among wild red macaws.

Then a woman the size  
of a votive candle, draped  
in the colors of wild macaws,  
appears on a branch up in a tree.

Never afraid,